

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2020 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven musicians who also served as a guest lecturer for the course. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of Chi Li

Conducted by Alexandra Yaralian and Samuel Hoffman, this interview with Professor Chi Li discusses her musical and educational backgrounds, as well as her upbringing in China. As an international performer with longstanding professional experience, Professor Chi Li explains her humble beginnings, the creation and fusion of her musical process, and why she does what she loves. She dives into her story, starting with how she rode her bike between villages during the ongoing Cultural Revolution to perform music for eager audiences, to coming to perform and teach in the United States.

Professor Chi Li grew up in a musical family and began performing at the age of five years old. She is a multi-instrumentalist and specializes in the erhu. She attended the Conservatory of Chinese Music in Beijing and received her B.A. in Chinese Music (erhu) in 1982. Professor Chi Li has performed professionally in China and has been featured in concerts in the United States held at venues such as Madison Square Garden and the Lincoln Center. She learned about the field of ethnomusicology through her father, who collected songs, such as work songs and wedding songs, sung by the villagers in their village. Professor Chi Li has been a part of the ethnomusicology faculty at UCLA since 1998 and leads the Music of China Ensemble and teaches a variety of topics in Chinese music such as Chinese opera and Jing opera.

Oral History Interview Transcript: Chi Li

Alexandra Yaralian: Hi, this is Alexandra Yaralian and Samuel Hoffman. We are the interviewers of this interview, and we are interviewing Professor Chi Li, she is our narrator -Hi Professor Chi Li, how are you doing?

Chi Li: Hi, good, I am good. Hi Alexandra and Hi Samuel.

AY: Thank you again, sorry

CL: No, yeah, I am doing well and how are you?

AY: Doing well. Thank you again for taking the time to speak with us today

CL: It is my pleasure.

AY: So today's day is Wednesday November 25th, 2020, and it is 9am PST. We are recording this interview via Zoom. Samuel is in Sweden and both Professor Chi Li and I are in California. So this is our oral history project for Ethnomusicology 20C where we will learn more about Professor Chi Li and Chinese music. This interview will be deposited in the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive and at Archive.org. So to get things started: Professor Chi Li, please describe your upbringing and your musical background.

AY: Alright, Ok, I think I will be brief and give you...Because I have lived long, there are a lot of stories to tell. But, I was born in a musical family. My father is a music teacher, was a music teacher for, Since he was 17 or 18 years old so, He taught music. And my mom was a nurse, but she loves to sing. She is a wonderful singer. This is how they got to know each other and, and, so my music background as a matter of fact, when I started I do not know because I grew up with musical instruments, and there were always instruments around me. I think I was very lucky, or able to have my, have a wonderful loving family to grow up and, surrounded with music, a lot of music. And then I went to the conservatory in Beijing, China. Graduated there and was a soloist and Central National Chinese Music Orchestra, and then I came to the States and basically I am teaching Chinese music and performing as well.

AY: Thank you

CL: You are welcome

AY: So, could you maybe delve more into your experience studying Chinese music at the conservatory in Beijing, and maybe tell us some memorable moments that shaped you as a musician.

CL: OK, shaped me as a musician, I do have to start from when I was little. As I said before, I do not know when I started music, but I do remember when I started to perform: about like 6 years old or, 5-6 years old and, since my father was a music teacher and he has music groups, and they often play sometimes, You know, He always take me with his music group and I never had any toys, or the musical instruments are my toys. And they are very generous, [*they*] never said "Don't break it or don't touch it." I was able to, yeah, play with a lot of instruments. It's not only Chinese instruments, my father had a pedal organ and you had to pedal on it. So I always stand on the pedal and played music and singing with it. So, that, and my first professional music teacher was a harmonica, He is one of the most famous harmonica artists in Shanghai or in China. I was his youngest student at the time. Of course, then I learned a lot of Chinese instruments. So, I started on western instruments as a matter of fact before I, learned, because erhu doesn't have kids size, so it's too big for me to handle, but I always, you know, played on the high pitch strings, and then I start to learn Erhu and other instruments as well. And then about, by 6 or 7 years old my father says "You have to pick up an instrument to work on it" and then I started to more focused on erhu. In a lot of ways I still learned the instruments. I played the erhu through the school years, through the cultural evolution, and through the time when I was in the countryside being re-educated, in the countryside [*a phone rings in the background*] Sorry, inevitable, and that is, I think music helped me a great deal to go through all those things, and then that made it possible for me to get admitted to the Central Conservatory of China after the school has been shut down for 10 years, because I was playing music all the time, and then

was able to sharpen my skill. Mostly I don't think it's the skill, it's the feeling of the music, because at those times, we, especially when I was in the countryside, there were no movies, no television, and musicians are the only source of entertainment the villagers or people can get. So you get a lot of appreciation from your audiences, and this is what music is for. I think, of course music has, you know, all different kind of functions, and you can play for yourself, you can play for your friends, but I think one of the very important things to make your music grow is you have audience, and you have feedback from audiences, and then you become stronger and you know, you are more motivated to, sharpen your skill to serve people better. I always remembered, Of course when I, go through re-education and then we had to work in the rice field during the day, it's long hours work and labor, but after the work, then I go out to perform. I know people will [be] waiting for you to perform for them, sometimes they wait for 2 hours and they set up the stage in the middle of the village. I go to different villages to play. Ride bicycles, fell into sideways, but it was great fun. It is not for anything else, it's just for, to see the happiness from the people when they saw you coming and when they know they will have some music they can listen. Of course, this is not, this is not just the music itself, it's more of getting people together and communicate, it's great fun. It's a lot of hard work, but it's great fun. I am not sure, I think I will, if I live again, I will do the same. And so, that made me play the music continuously and when the conservatory re-opened after the Cultural Revolution, then I was able to present my music and get it approved, and get into the conservatory, and start my formal training, and I can claim myself as "I am going to be a musician" although I did it for many years before I get to the school. And so, during the conservatory, we have a lot of courses, it's 6 days it's not 5 days. It's 6 days, class, classes, and I think many units, 32 or, yeah, a lot of courses to cover, and rigorous ear training, and other than theory classes, then we had to learn piano as well as basic education, I mean, it's a required class. Many required classes, and I think it's different from the school system here. We do not pick classes, it is all assigned. So it's all assigned, all the courses are required, so this quarter you are going to learn this, next quarter you are going to learn that. You don't make your own schedule. So yeah, went through musical training and I had devoted, wonderful teachers, they, including my, the teacher of my erhu, teachers, they are all masters of the instrument. And since the Conservatory would consider as the top of the top, so they pick up teachers. And, spent a lot of hours practice, and one of the thing I've learned and I really feel is, other than the love of music, I appreciate the opportunity very very much, and I know how hard I can get into the school and how hard my family supported me and, friends and my teachers, previous teachers. So I think I definitely appreciated the most, all the time, I would always remind myself "this is very, very rare opportunity I have here," so sometimes I, other than short time's sleep and a quick lunch, dinner or breakfast, classes, I always go back to practice, 13 hours a day every day, no weekend, I mean, because every minute is so, so precious, and the teachers are wonderful. They always give you what they know and, one of my erhu teacher actually he is a, not only great knowledge about erhu, also he is a historian. So he always give me a lot of his stories, history about, behind music, behind the current music trend, where they come from. So I was really getting great education there. Of course, other than the solo instruments, we have ensemble, to go and then to...and to prepare us to not only be a soloist, to be in the orchestra as well. So, that is my education in, basic education in Conservatory. Did I answer your question right?

AY: Yes, you did.

CL: I think I carried away a little bit.

AY: That's OK. We love listening to it, thank you. Our next question: Please tell us some significant differences and similarities between China and the US as a professional musician. So, maybe such as performing in presidential concerts in China versus Madison Square Garden."

CL: OK, I think, music-wise, there are more similarity than difference, Chinese music, especially for modern music it is more blended in. One of the things I think, when I come to the States I can have the opportunity to meet with more, different kind of music. When I was, I mean nowadays it is different. We have internet, all the music you can...you almost, you can sit in one place, like Sweden and California is just next door. All the information, you are able to access all different kind of music, but at that time, to me, I can only talk about when I first came, and then it was eye opening. I was able to see more different kinds of music and, so that's the difference. I think it's more of the environmental, environment is different, and when I come to the States, I think one of the thing I appreciated Chinese music more. When you are in China, I played music, all my friends play, you hear Chinese music everywhere, you take it for granted. And when I came here, I do appreciate it more. I know it's, one: its different from all the other...the music I mean, for the tune, and, but environment is different. When I perform in...As a musician, even after I graduate from school then I go to the Central National Chinese Music Orchestra, they will come to the school when you have graduated and they will pick up the ones they feel suited for their company, and then they arrange everything. Everything is arranged for you. And, with a performance, presidential performance is the same thing, they think: this musician is...or this music, and this program is a fit for that situation. So what do is just do my best to perform. Here is different, you have choices and, people know about you then they may come to ask you: "Do you want to come to perform?" Or people said: "Oh, we'd like to have this event, did you want to come?" Or, it's not arranged, but it's more vibrant*, and you know, the audience are the ones they, particularly they like to come to see your music and they love your music. They have all different kinds of choices, here you have, including the audiences. They can come to your concert, or they can go to the other concerts. It's, mostly would be true love, or they are curious about you or, new to them. So the environment is different, and, in terms of performance, I think as a musician yourself, you are always going to give 200 percent out for the audiences, it doesn't matter who the audiences are. So I think mainly, I would say, the environment is different. All the musicians are, I think, we have, you know, more, either play with the Chinese musicians or you play with a different music background musicians. But,"

AY: Thank you. So we discussed a little bit about your experience studying at the Conservatory in Beijing, your performance experience. We are just curious: how and why were you introduced to ethnomusicology, what drew you to the field?

CL: Oh, Ok. This probably, if you go to the source, as a matter of fact, I mentioned that my father is a music teacher, he started in countryside to teach Chinese...he is a general teacher in the countryside, but the place he taught [*has*] very musical vibrant people, the farmers that sing during the fieldwork, and during the different kind of work they have different kind of songs, and of course they have wedding songs. So he start to collect music. He collect a lot of music, so I, it's his hobby, and it's his love of music. And eventually he become a music teacher, specifically in music. And then he always told us stories, and how he collected the music and how he did.

Just to like, that was, 60, 70 years ago, and just like ethnomusicology, we do not have the name of “Ethnomusicology” at the time...did not know...but actually what he is doing is, what ethnomusicology is doing nowadays. So he told me when I was in the orchestra, we go tour, so wherever we go my father says “You will find wonderful music wherever you go, local people, local musicians.” So I carried his tradition and then wherever I go, I’d like to collect music, I’d like to make friends there, and I like to learn from them. So I, but at the time, it is not titled as ethnomusicology, but I am always interested in it. And, then when I came to the States, my husband actually he is majoring in ethnomusicology and this is how I officially introduced to ethnomusicology. So, it’s just like how I started with music, it’s hard to draw a line, when and where, but basically that’s the, I think that I have a lot, a long history with ethnomusicology. And it is a wonderful field, it’s a wonderful field.

AY: Thank you.

CL: You are welcome.

AY: Our next question: other than the Music of Chinese Ensemble, what classes have you taught in the past, and please describe these classes.

CL: Ok, As a matter of fact, I mainly teach Chinese music, and they are a lot to cover already, Chinese Music Ensemble, I taught different instruments, I, other than instrument, about, yeah 20 different instruments, other than the instruments, I teach Chinese Opera, Chinese Opera, including different kind of Chinese Opera like Jing Opera, and Kun Opera, Shanghainese Opera and Cantonese opera. And also I teach dance, Chinese dance as well, traditional dance, fan dance, dragon dance, and the lion dance. And, those are all part of, you know, Chinese music performance, and also Chinese folk songs, I teach, Chinese folks songs and also, Like choir, Chinese folk songs. So, this is my field and, so, I teach [*Ethnomusicology*] 158 that is introduced to Chinese instruments, it is more talk, theory about...not really theory, it’s, instrumental history and the musicians and the music and the instruments, that is 158. And also I give a lot of talk to different colleges and different settings, to introduce Chinese music or Chinese music education in America, and also, Chinese musical instrument.

AY: Thank you and, The end of the interview, but I just want to squeeze one more question in: So how has your experience been with the fusion of Chinese music and other musical traditions?

CL: Wow... that is my favorite subject. I think I am very lucky. I am able to teach at UCLA because we have so many music masters from all different countries and, I was able to play with them. The fusion is my favorite part, the fusion is, I always say, fusion actually, I think I learned from it, musicians, when you get together you inspire each other, and you just feel your music is elevated to a different level. It is so amazing, I have been, played with, I think the, orchestra and the jazz musicians and with the Persian musicians, and especially with Middle East Ensemble, Professor Racy. That is, I, two of our ensembles play together, in class and on stage, that’s so, not only me and other musicians, and students as well, we share students in his class and in my class, and bring the music to my class and bring the instruments to his class. And you feel this is such a language, You don’t need, I mean...it’s such an experience of you feel each other, and

that's the best way to communicate, and to be friend with everybody, And you just don't feel any barrier, two musics played together it's not one plus one equals two, it's one plus one equals ten. It's just more than your own music. You feel other peoples [*thoughts*], and then next phrase, because most of those music one play are improvisation, so when you improvisation you just feel so free, and you feel the environment, and you want harmonic and you want to play the same language you seek, and yeah, during the performance, it's alive and everytime you play, you can like play days without stop, because it is always new idea come out and it's always new music you are inspired by. So it's great, and I think we had quite a few good performances together as well. I'm sorry, should I give you the dates or, maybe it's not necessary, I think, yeah, Maureen [*Russell*], her archive [*UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive*] has everything, so I think we do have some recordings of these performances in the archive.

AY: Thank you so much Professor Chi Li, this was very interesting.

Samuel Hoffman: Yeah thank you very much.

CL: You are welcome. Thank you very much to give me the opportunity to talk, although I'm not very good at talk, I rather play. But, at least some part of, I mean all what I said is true, story, and, I hope my talk can inspire more people to come to love the music because music is the best thing for human being. You can..you find peace here, you find harmonic here, and the world, People need music.

AY: Thank you.

SH: Absolutely, thank you very much for sharing.

CL: You are welcome, thank you for listening to me.